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SOPHIE ARNOULD

(1740-1803)

By FRANCIS ROGERS

ALTHOUGH most, if not actually all, of the great singers of the eighteenth century belonged to the Italian School, there were a few both born and trained in France, whose art was so admirable and striking as to assure them a well merited place among the immortals. Of these none is so worthy of remembrance and so completely typical of her country and her time as the fair and frail Sophie Arnould.

Madeleine Sophie Arnould was born in Paris. According to her own story, the year was 1744, and the exact place the very room in which Admiral Coligny had been assassinated on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1572. For many years Sophie was accepted as a reliable authority on these points, but later investigators, among whom Edmond de Goncourt (who wrote an entertaining biography of her), have discovered that in reality she was born in 1740, in the Rue Louis-le-Grand, only two or three minutes walk from the Théâtre Français.

Her parents were of the *bourgeois* class, but her mother possessed such unusual energy and intelligence as to win for her the admiration and friendship of some of the chief intellectual personages in France, including d'Alembert, Diderot and Voltaire. Sophie inherited her mother's excellent mental qualities and at the age of twelve was mistress of both Latin and Italian. She was taught also both dancing and singing and even as a very little girl pleased everybody with her singing. Voltaire wrote most approvingly of her delightful songs and of the graceful manner with which she bore herself at her first communion.

She received some instruction at an Ursuline Convent, but her talent and beauty early attracted the favorable attention of Madame de Pompadour, and when she was only sixteen the King made her a member of the opera. Nothing good can be said of the moral standards prevailing at the Paris Opera under Louis XV, but Sophie's parents were unable or indisposed to prevent their daughter from accepting so dangerous an appointment. As for the girl herself, she said quite frankly: "To enter the opera is to go to the devil—but what of it? It's my destiny."



Sophie Arnould
(From the portrait by Greuze)

She studied the music of her rôles with a Mlle. Tel; Mlle. Clairou, the famous tragedian, taught her how to play them. In 1757 she made her début in a *ballet divertissement* called "L'Amour des Dieux." In extant records of the performance we find mention of her vivacity and charm, also of a becoming lilac costume, but not a word about her voice or singing.

Probably even then, when she was still only a girl in her 'teens, her voice was the least striking of her many gifts. Fortunately for her, the French have always held "*l'art de bien dire*" and histrionic skill in much higher esteem than the possession of a beautiful voice. This preference rendered possible to her a brilliant career which in any other country would have been impossible. The voiceless singer is to be found in France only.

Of her own voice Sophie wrote: "It is rather agreeable in quality and, while it is not really resonant, I can by means of good diction make it carry even in the largest halls." This was probably the best that could be said of it; the worst was said by a critic who described it as "the best asthma he had ever heard."

Whatever the defects in her voice, for twenty years Sophie was the undisputed queen of the Paris Opera. She created all the new feminine rôles of importance and exerted a great influence on the conduct of the entire opera-house.

In an epoch of unblushing license she was notorious for her innumerable love affairs. De Goncourt calls her "*la seule courtisane de l'âge d'or des filles*." Every gallant in Paris paid court to her and a catalog of her victims would be quite as long as the famous list of Don Giovanni himself. Her most important affair of the heart was with a young nobleman, le Comte de Lauraguais, to whom she bore three children and with whom she maintained an enduring *liaison*.

She lived in the greatest luxury and by means of her extraordinary intelligence and personal charm gathered about her the most learned and witty men in Paris, the most brilliant city in the world. In her salon were to be met such world-famous men as Voltaire, Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, Beaumarchais, Diderot and Helvetius, in addition to many a lesser light in literature and science. Women with reputations to worry about might and did avoid her company, but the other sex unanimously condoned the irregularity of her life for the sake of her stimulating conversation and ready tongue.

This tongue of hers was far-famed for its wit, or, as we should put it now, for its sharpness. French authors still repeat admiringly her brilliant retorts and characterizations, which, while they

are entirely devoid of what we call humor, were as penetrating and clean-cut as the thrust of a rapier. Two instances of this wit will serve our purpose here. Once, when a stupid beauty was complaining of the importunities of her lovers, Arnould said to her, "Why, if you really wish to be rid of them, you have only to open your mouth and speak." Again: she met a physician, who, in making his round of professional visits, had with him his gun on the chance of being able to pot a rabbit by the way. Arnould stopped him and remarked, "You are sure of bagging your patients one way or the other, aren't you, Doctor?"

Such as she was, she was exactly to the taste of the Parisians, who admired, petted and spoiled her without stint. Nearly voiceless, as she probably was, her operatic impersonations were enthusiastically extolled. Her dramatic gifts must have been of a very high order, for David Garrick said she was the only French *tragédienne* who spoke both to his eyes and to his heart, and Gluck declared that without the potency of her declamation his *Iphigénie* would not have been accepted in France.

Her early successes were achieved in French operas that now have been relegated to the limbo of almost complete oblivion. Among these, she was especially admired in Rameau's "Castor et Pollux" (recently revived at the Paris Opera). She reached the zenith of her career in Gluck's "Iphigénie en Aulide" (1774), "Orphée" (1774) (in which she sang the part of Euridice) and "Alceste" (1776).

The close of her career as a singer came unusually early. For twenty years she had been a hard-working singer, but she was still really young and by right should have been in active service for another ten years, but, unfortunately, an imperfect vocal technique, combined with careless habits of life, had already grievously impaired the freshness of her never-too-beautiful voice. In addition, too much success had made her careless of public opinion. In 1769 she had dared to treat with disrespect the all-powerful Du Barry herself, who in revenge had persuaded the King to exclude her from the opera. But the opera could not get along without her at that time and she was soon recalled, her position seemingly more secure than ever.

As time went on her enemies grew stronger and stronger, and finally in 1777, persuaded Gluck to allot the creation of the title rôle in "Armide" to Rosalie Levasseur, a young artist whose career was destined to be almost as brilliant and quite as scandalous as Arnould's. The affront was too heinous for the hitherto unrivalled prima donna to accept, and she immediately resigned

altogether from the opera. Her retirement was practically the end of her career as a public singer, for although she sang occasionally at court as late as 1788, she never again appeared in opera.

Her resignation on the operatic stage caused a great commotion in the musical world, because a considerable portion of the public still held that she was incomparable. A paragraph written at the time by an admirer throws an interesting light not only on her methods, but also on the perennial question of the relative duties of composer and singer. This anonymous writer says:

What sort of music is it in which Arnould is no longer first actress, where Mr. Legros [a tenor] loses all the charm of his lovely voice because he is granted neither cadence nor long-sustained tones; where recitative is as simple as speech. When Mr. Gluck takes the trouble not only to prescribe the inflexions of the voice, but also the duration of the notes and the movement of the music, is it not clear that the actress has nothing more to do? The reason for Arnould's failure in Gluck's operas is that she is too good an actress; because she is not free to lengthen or shorten her notes at will—in response to sentiment or physical condition. Subjected to the tyranny of the written measure, she becomes merely a figurant and her talent is superfluous.

Although Arnould's artistic career had come to an end, her celebrity as a courtesan was in no way impaired. She was still lovely to look upon, always exquisitely dressed, witty and sympathetic. In addition to her pension from the opera, she received from unnamed sources an income sufficient to support her luxuriously. She lived in elegant apartments in the Palais Royal, where every Tuesday evening her salon was the rendezvous for the finest minds in France.

In 1778 when Voltaire returned to Paris after his long exile, one of his very first visits was to Sophie, whom he had known and been fond of ever since her childhood.

Her attitude towards life was characteristic of most women of her type: the past gone, seize to-day; as to the future, who knows whether there will be one? She never gave a regretful thought to the follies of her youth. When Voltaire on his last visit said to her, "I am eighty-four and I have done at least eighty-four foolish things," Arnould replied cheerfully, "I am not yet forty and I have committed a thousand." In the philosophy of her old age she used to say of her youth, "*C'était le bon temps et comme j'étais malheureuse!*" (Those were the days, and yet how unhappy I was!).

As her years increased, her sources of income naturally began to dry up, although even so late as the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 she still had about her a circle of men who assembled

regularly in her salon to discuss the burning issues of the day. Another year or two and her affairs, like those of so many others, went completely to ruin in the national eruption.

For a time she withdrew from Paris and did not return till after the Terror. Her letters written during this period, despite their admirable courage and humor, show how hard put to it she was to find the wherewithal to support herself and her children. Finally, Fouché, Napoleon's Minister of Police, who had known and admired her in her happier years, secured for her a small pension, with which she established herself decently in a small apartment. That old age had not deprived her of all her early charm is attested by the fact that once again she was able to gather about her a circle of intelligent friends who took pleasure in her conversation.

Thus, humbly, but with admirable dignity and spirit, she, the embodiment of the witty, pleasure-loving and licentious epoch of Louis XV, survived into the consulship of the upstart man of action, Napoleon.

Death claimed her in 1803. As she lay dying she murmured to the priest who was administering the last rites, "I am like Mary Magdalen: much will be pardoned to me because I have loved much."